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# WEST HARTFORD CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS & SUMMARY

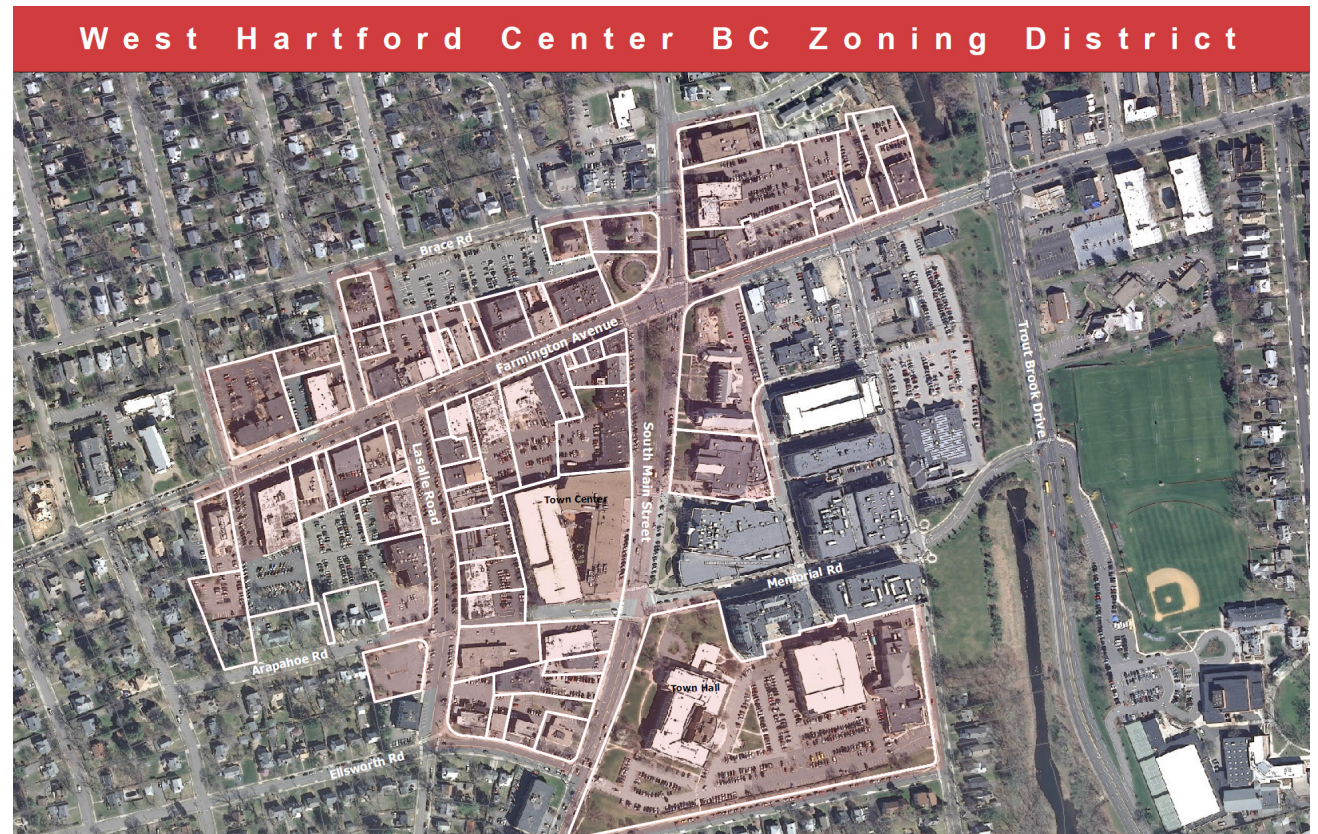
FRANCISCO GOMES, AICP

SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER, FITZGERALD & HALLIDAY INC.



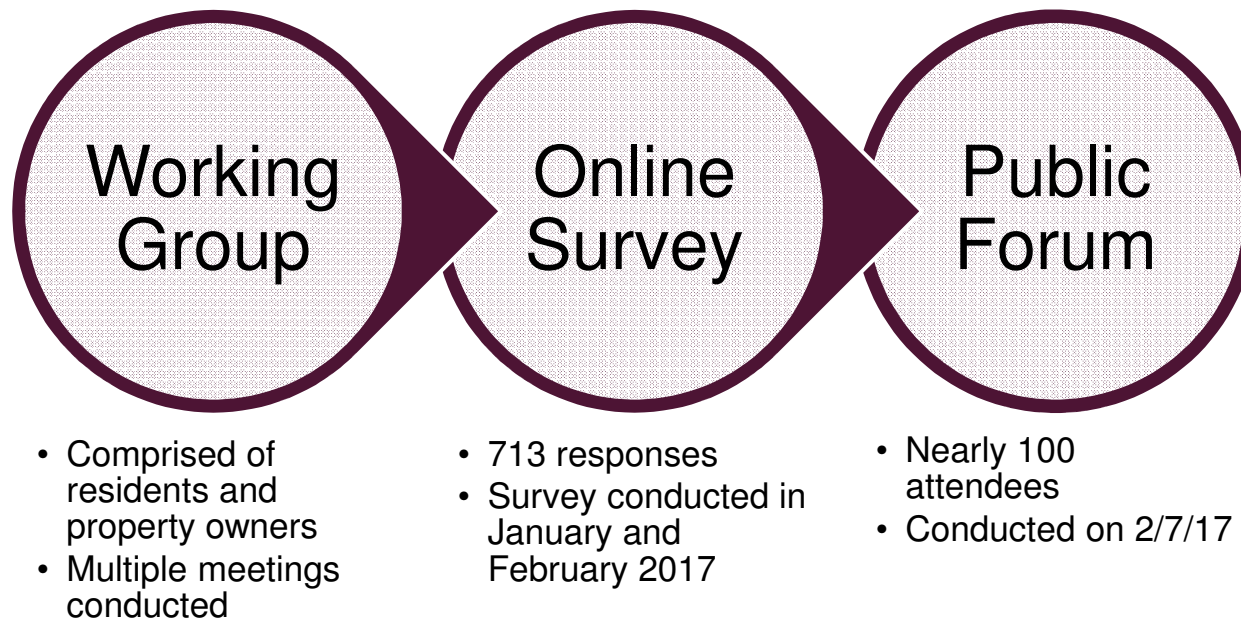
## FOCUS AREA

- Outreach effort was focused on The Center and the BC zoning district
- The relationship of adjacent neighborhoods to the Center was also considered



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## OUTREACH PROCESS



# PUBLIC FORUM

- A public forum was held on Feb 7<sup>th</sup> at the Town Hall.
- Two sessions were held, the first session had about 60 attendees while the later session had close to 40
- The forum consisted of a presentation, interactive survey, and a series of break out sessions focusing on specific topics
- The forum was featured in We-Ha.com news

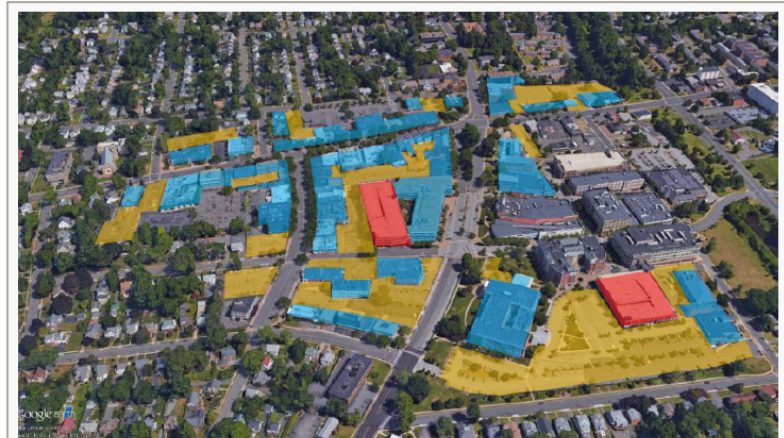
## Public Weighs in on Vision for West Hartford Center

[we-ha.com/public-weighs-vision-west-hartford-center/](http://we-ha.com/public-weighs-vision-west-hartford-center/)

By We-Ha

2/7/2017

Residents and members of the West Hartford business community had the opportunity to provide input Tuesday night during two public forums about the central business district.



West Hartford's central business district. Town of West Hartford image



## WHAT WE HEARD AT THE FORUM

Discussion was focused on identifying Strengths, Issues, and Ideas for the following topic areas:

- Business and Property Uses
- Architecture
- Parking and Mobility
- Open Space and Pedestrian Realm



## BUSINESSES AND PROPERTY USES

- Strengths
  - Variety/number of restaurants
  - Residential neighborhoods connected to center
  - Local and regional shopping destination
- Issues
  - Parking- fees and quantity
  - Too many banks
  - High rents cause vacancies
  - Transition of restaurants into bars
- Ideas
  - Active uses in front Town Center
  - Community events should be promoted



# ARCHITECTURE

- Strengths
  - Diversity/character of architectural styles
  - Orientation of buildings to sidewalks and streets
  - Height and scale of buildings- allows natural light
- Issues
  - Aging facades, maintenance issues
  - Loss of historic structures
  - Threat of tall buildings out of scale
- Ideas
  - Façade improvement standards/design guidelines
  - New development needs to be sensitive to historic character
  - More architectural variety: balconies, roof decks, green roofs



# PARKING AND MOBILITY

- Strengths
  - Can park once and visit many shops and restaurants in one trip- “park and walk” town
  - Parking kiosks are good
- Issues
  - Not enough parking
  - Expensive parking fees causes parking encroachment onto residential streets
  - Safety concerns related to parking garage
- Ideas
  - Better wayfinding and signage in the center
  - Increase mass transit awareness and promote
  - Add bike lanes and bike racks
  - Residential parking passes





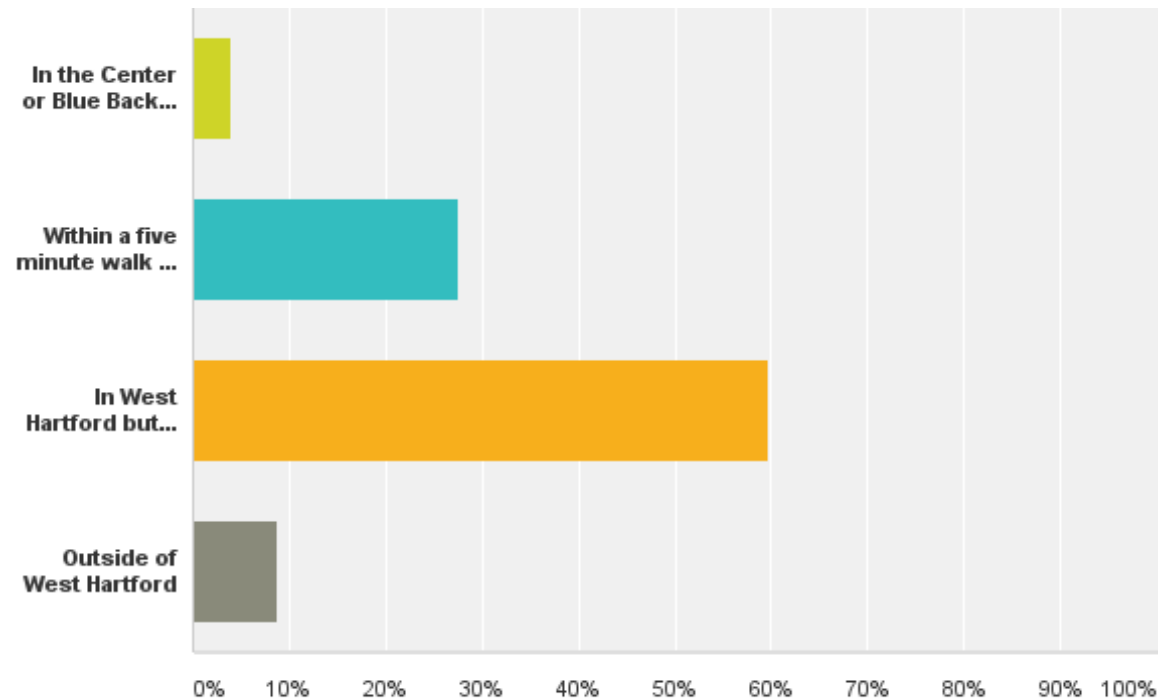
# OPEN SPACE AND PEDESTRIAN REALM

- Strengths
  - Wide and continuous sidewalk network
  - Landscaping
  - Human scale environment with natural light
- Issues
  - Transition from restaurant to bar use causes maintenance issues
  - Very loud in the evening
  - Difficult pedestrian crossings
- Ideas
  - More events like OM Street where streets are closed and pedestrian foot traffic is encouraged
  - Additional functional open space desired
  - Quincy Market style use of LaSalle, maybe for Farmers Market Day
  - Consider ways to make the median on South Main street more accessible and usable



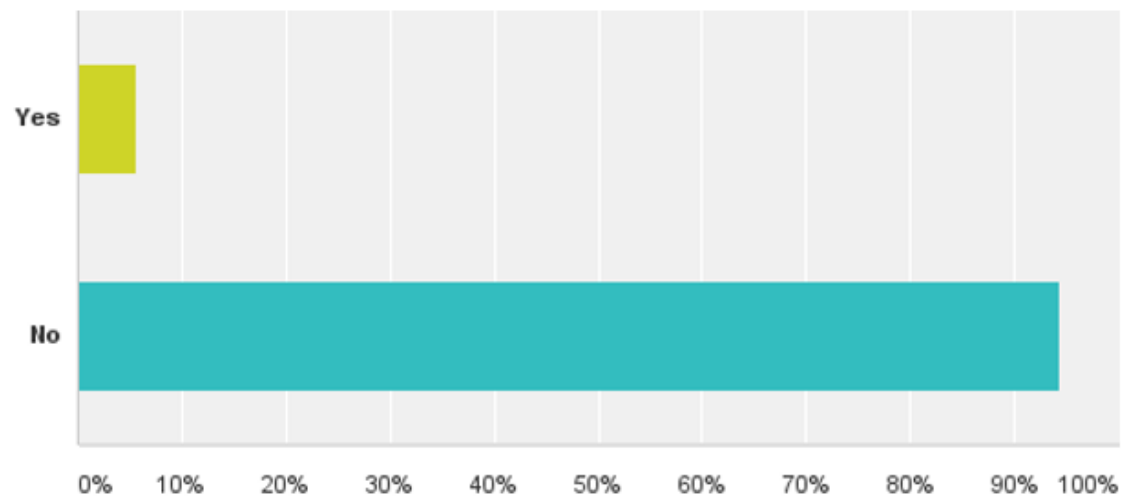
## ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

- Over 700 respondents
- Over half of survey respondents live in West Hartford, but outside of the Center.
- About 30% of respondents live within a five minute walk of the Center.
- 63 respondents live outside of West Hartford (presumably, property owners, business owners, and/or employees)



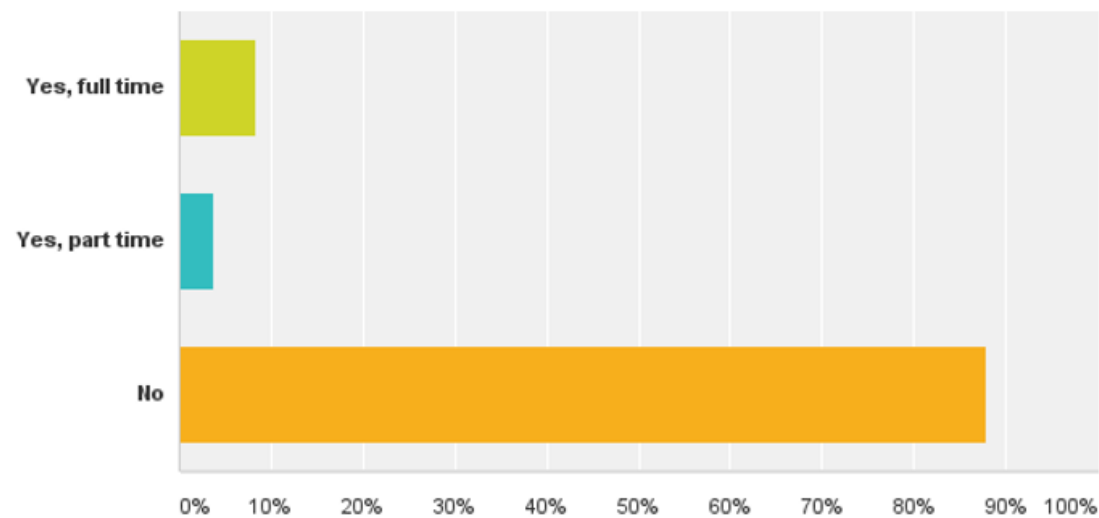
## DO YOU OWN A BUSINESS OR COMMERCIAL PROPERTY IN THE CENTER?

- 40 respondents owned a business or commercial property in the Center



## DO YOU WORK IN THE CENTER?

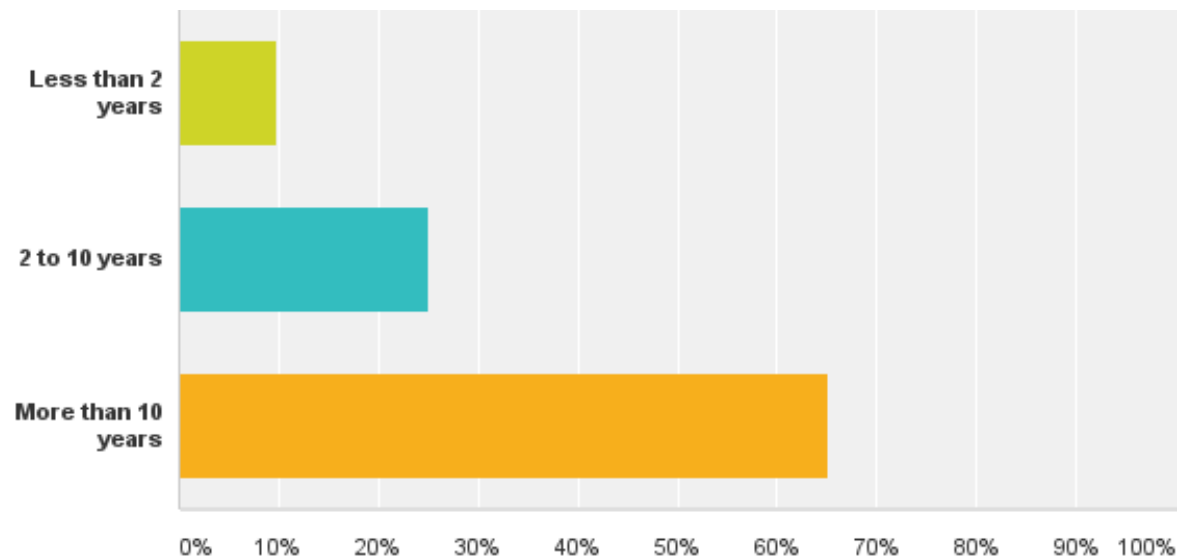
- 86 respondents work in the Center





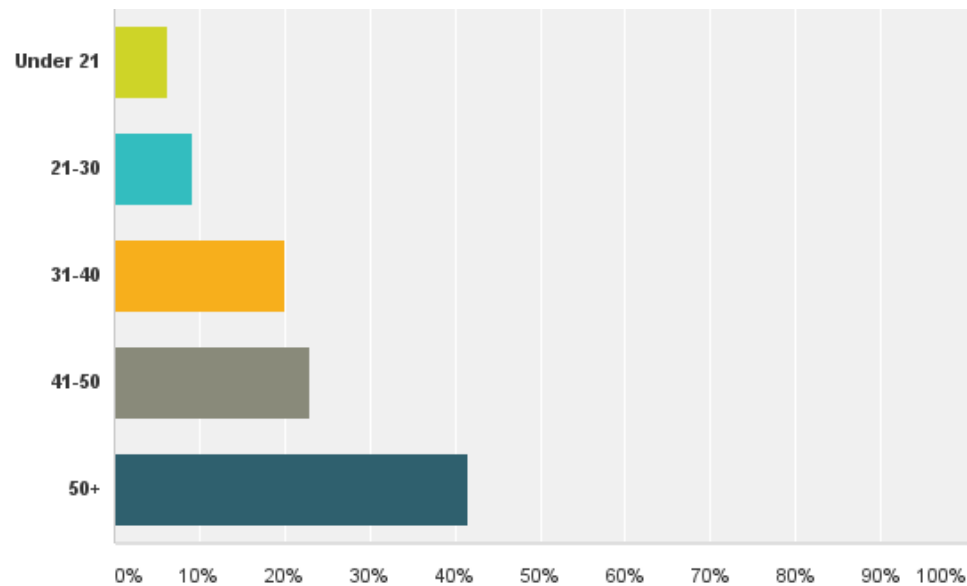
## HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN WEST HARTFORD?

- The majority of respondents have lived, worked, or owned a business longer than 10 years- they are invested.



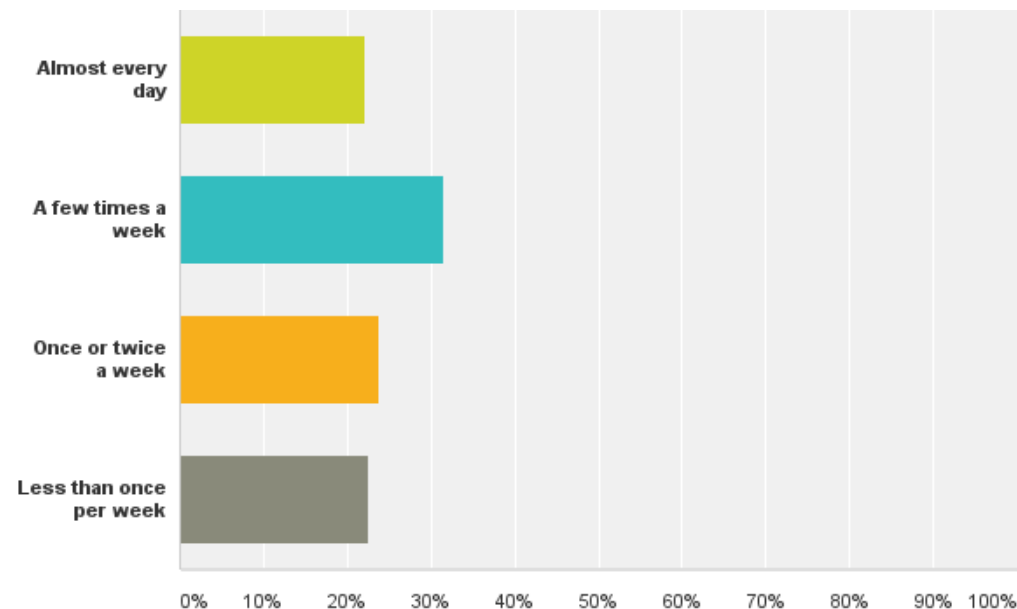
## WHAT IS YOUR AGE?

- The number of survey respondents identifying with each age bracket increased with age, with the greatest number in the 50+ age bracket.



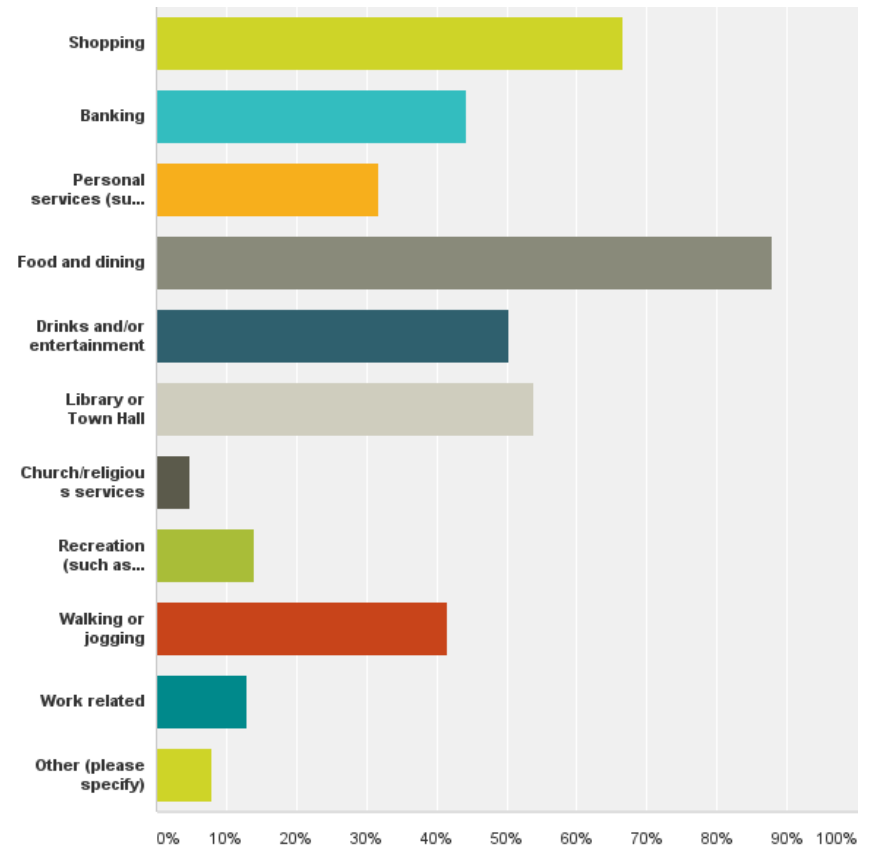
## HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO INTO THE CENTER?

- Responses were evenly spread, with the greatest number (221) of respondents traveling to the Center a few times a week.



# WHAT DO YOU MOST USE THE CENTER FOR?

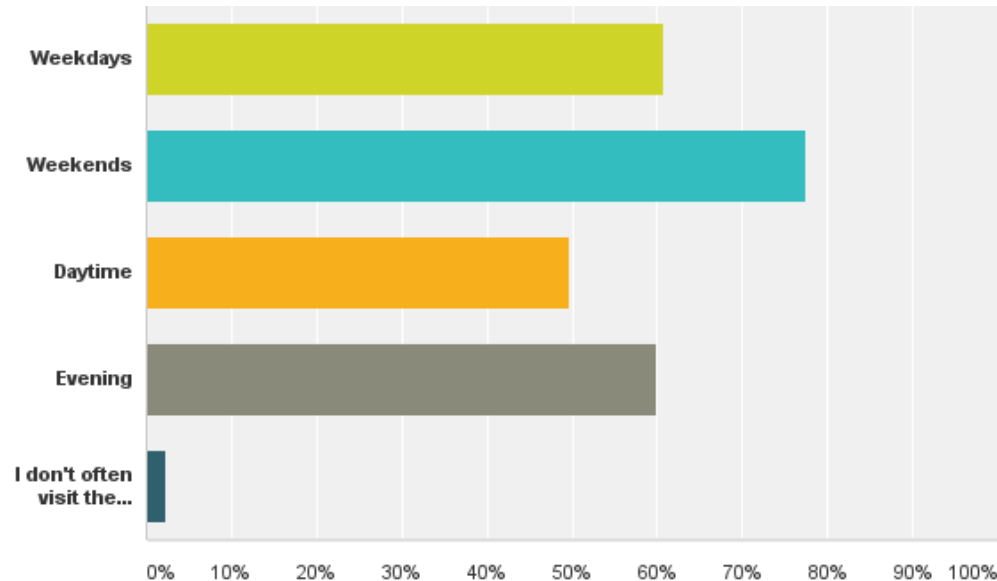
- Food and dining, shopping, and library or town hall were the most popular categories selected for what people use the Center for.
- Least popular were church and religious services, work related, and other (please specify); where some responses included doctors appointments, post office, and day care





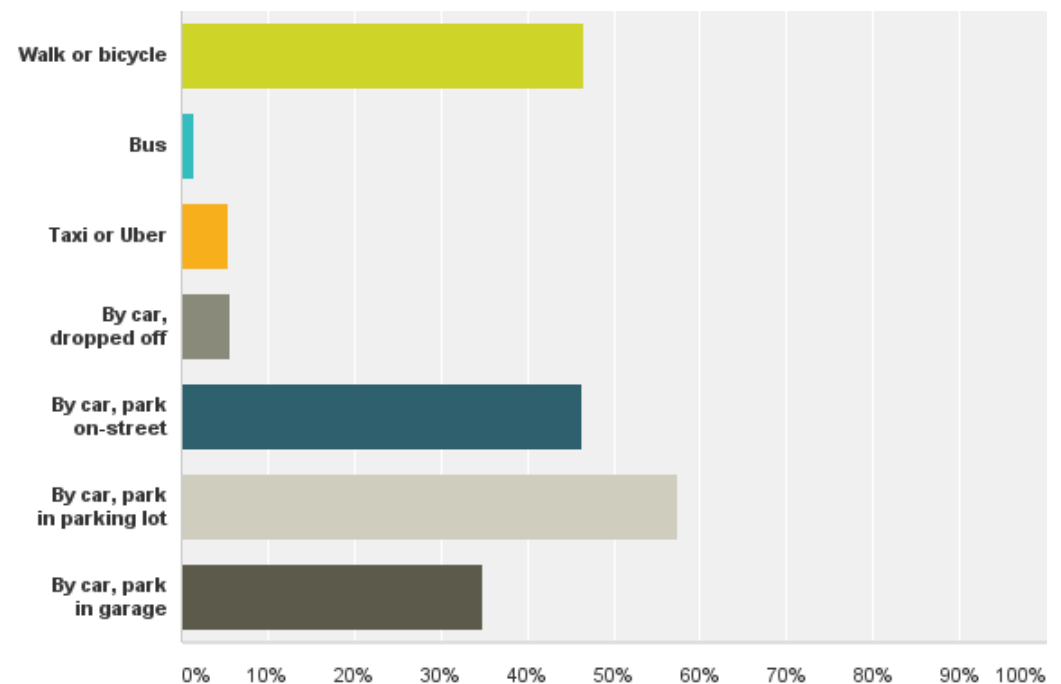
## WHEN DO YOU MOST OFTEN VISIT THE CENTER?

- Results were spread out, with the most respondents visiting the center on the weekends, in the evening



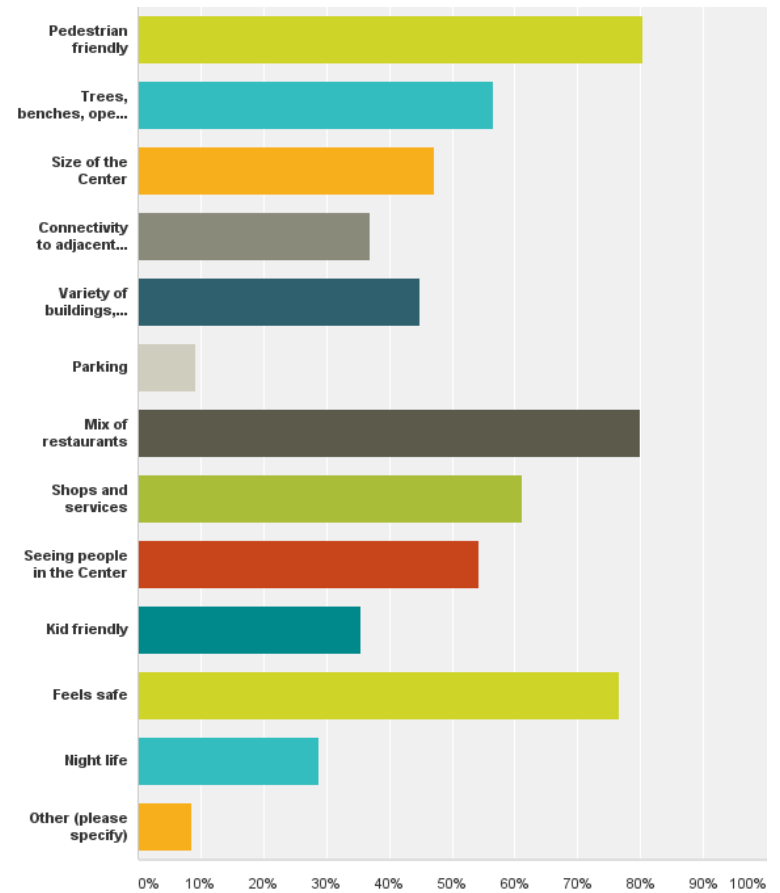
## HOW DO YOU USUALLY ARRIVE TO THE CENTER?

- Most survey respondents arrive at the center by car, with the most parking on-street or in a parking lot.
- Nearly half (326) said they walk or bicycle to the Center.
- Very few people arrive by bus, taxi, or ride service



# WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT THE CENTER?

- Mix of restaurants, the pedestrian friendly environment, perception of safety, and shops and services were the top choices.



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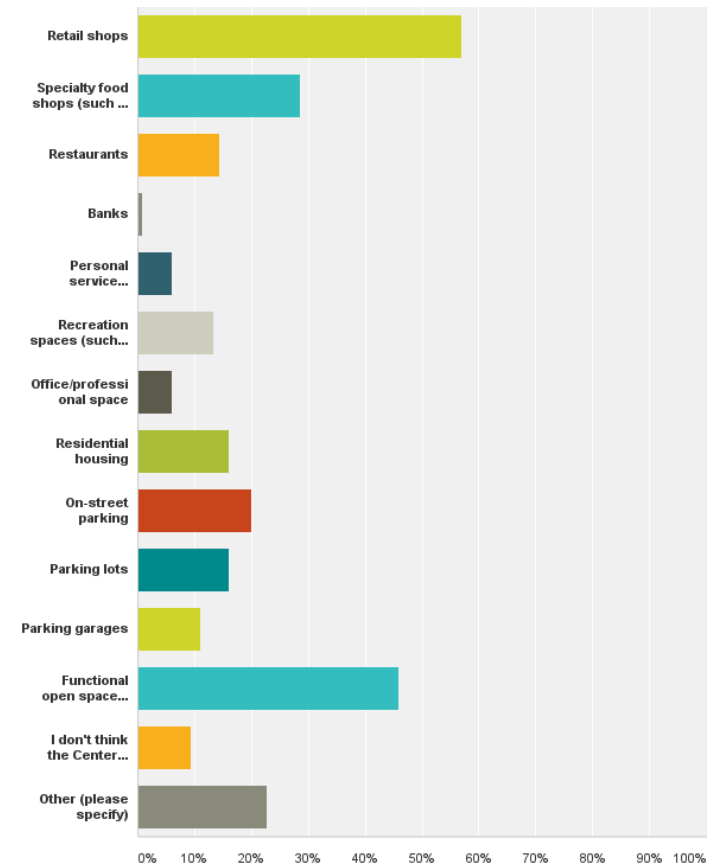
## WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT THE CENTER? (EXCERPTS OF COMMENTS)

- *I used to love the mix of options in the center however, now it seems to be filled with banks and restaurants. It would be nice if there were alternative things for people to do and if live music was allowed but maybe that is where Elmwood can fill a void which is center has created*
- *I like trees, benches, and open spaces but would suggest there could be much more to enhance the downtown vibe. We are people who respect and appreciate green spaces!*
- *I don't go to the Center because as a Town of West Hartford resident and the amount of property taxes I pay I should not have to pay for parking.*
- *Our center makes our community unique among towns our size. It is sad that other towns never enjoy such a gathering place-they stay divided by malls.*
- *It seems the center and BBS are turning into restaurant zones. I miss there being more shopping available.*
- *I chose to move to West Hartford when I came back to CT after 10 years because of the Center, it has a European feel unique in CT. I have found it sad to see a lot of the shops having left or in the process of leaving. The restaurants are nice but it is good to have a mix of shops to attend to daily necessities rather than having to go to the mall for everything*



# WHAT DOES THE CENTER NEED MORE OF?

- Retail shops and functional open space were the top choices identified
- Additional banks were least desirable

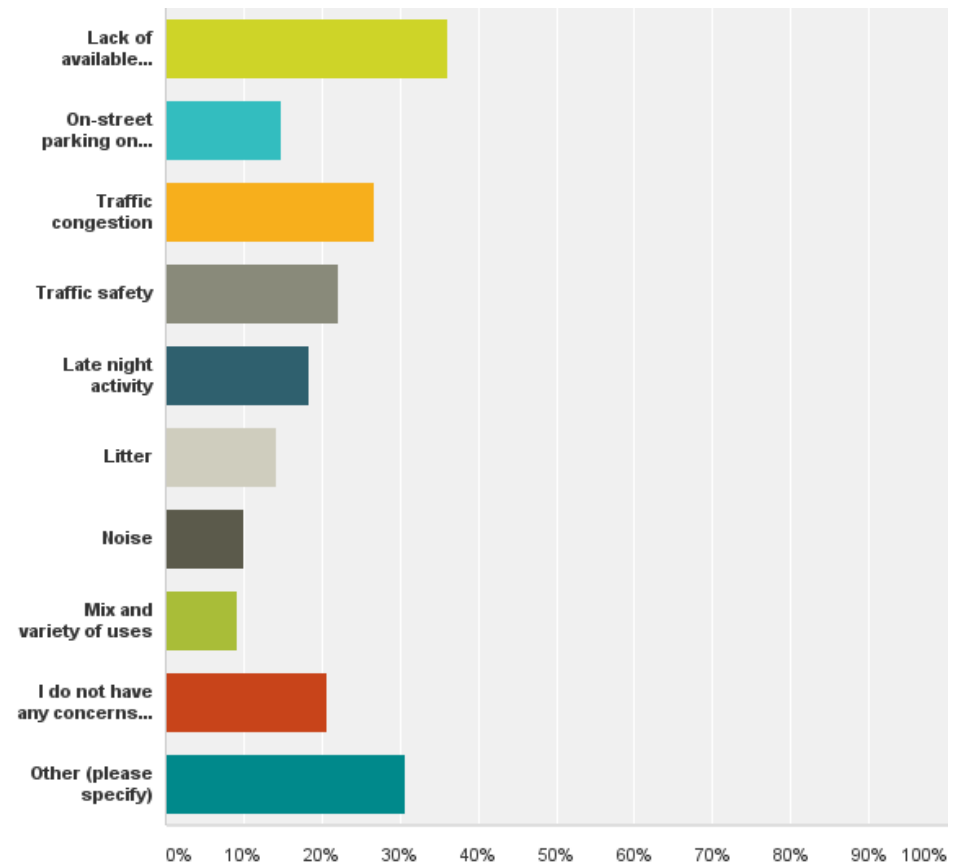


## WHAT DOES THE CENTER NEED MORE OF? (EXCERPTS OF COMMENTS)

- *Free parking*
- *Goldilocks density: dense enough to support vibrant main streets with retail and services for local needs, but not too high that people can't take the stairs in a pinch. Dense enough to support bike and transit infrastructure, but not so dense to need subways and huge underground parking garages. Dense enough to build a sense of community, but not so dense as to have everyone slip into anonymity.*
- *Centers for Art, Theatre in music. It is to recall focused and not very diverse. We need to attract more of an eclectic group of people to create a more vibrant, energetic atmosphere.*
- *The center needs more affordable restaurants in addition to the high-end ones. A space for live music, like Infinity Hall, would be a wonderful addition. More recreational spaces, like a bowling alley, would also be welcome.*
- *We are losing retail space at a dramatic pace and it has left the with no balance between restaurants, services, and retail. West Hartford has always been known as a great place to shop, but we are losing that.*
- *Market will mostly dictate what makes sense, but properly scaled development that does not exceed present height restrictions and steps down to the surrounding residential community. I firmly believe and would suggest that if the Town is making any concessions, developments need to be MOST RESPONSIBLE to the Planet and ECO system.*

## WHAT CONCERNS YOU ABOUT THE CENTER?

- Lack of available parking, traffic congestion, and traffic safety, were primary concerns
- Other concerns include:
  - Retail does not seem to be doing well
  - Building zoning changes
  - Density should not increase, becoming more of a City than a Town
  - Parking fees are too expensive
- 20% of respondents did not have any specific concerns about the Center



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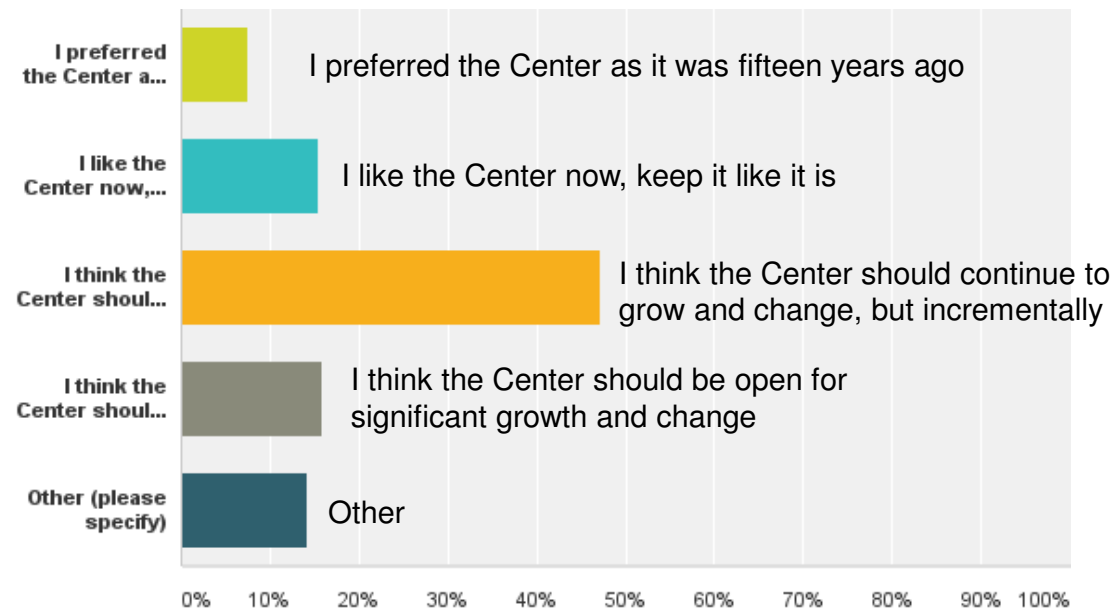
## WHAT CONCERNS YOU ABOUT THE CENTER? (EXCERPTS OF COMMENTS)

- *I feel that the town is so focused on growth that it will alter the scale of the architecture and ruin the center. The town treats the center as a commercial zone but it is woven tightly with neighborhoods. LEAVE THE CENTER AT THE SCALE THAT IT IS.*
- *I do not want the density to go up. Starting to become more of a city than a town. Becoming less family friendly as stores for shopping for kids have left (shoes, clothes, stationary) and replaced with restaurants and salons. Forcing us to the mall more and more. Don't want height of buildings to go up.*
- *Our concern is that short-sighted and inexperienced developers, unfamiliar with the goals of New Urbanism and only interested in a quick return on investment, will want to inflict on us inappropriate and/or aesthetically unsuitable projects. We are open to the possibility of incremental smart growth, by which we mean intelligently conceived mixed use expansion of the Center. Although there is clearly a knee-jerk NIMBY attitude shown in the remarks of some of our fellow residents, there are also legitimate concerns with respect to noise, on-street parking, late-night behaviors, etc. The ideal balance is not always easy to find, but it does seem, as Blueback demonstrated (we were supporters), that dealing with respected, experienced, well-financed developers is crucial.*



## WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE CENTER?

- Close to half of survey respondents believe the Center should continue to grow and change, but incrementally
- Less than 8% of people said they preferred the Center as it was fifteen years ago



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## WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE CENTER? (EXCERPTS OF COMMENTS)

- *I think the evolution of the center has been great and I am open to growth that will help maintain its current vibrancy. A few more retail stores to balance out the dining would be great!*
- *Growth without a long term vision is chaos. So incremental growth as long as it fits into a realistic long term plan. I think growth or attracting businesses that will offset or lower our property tax and creates new jobs are the main two factors that would need to be met.*
- *Absolutely do not make the Center a city. I cringe when people call it "Downtown" which is what we have always called Hartford. I do not want tall buildings (with windy caverns) like Blue Back. If I wanted a city feel I'd live in one. Leave the height, openness and sun filled streets as they are now and let BBS be the "city" part. I like the center as it is but honestly think there needs to be a better mix of stores and no more restaurants. Don't ruin the Center I've loved since the 1960s.*
- *I love the idea of the center growing and changing, even the addition of residential units to bring in the 20-somethings. However, it should be done cautiously so as not to ruin the small town feel nor price everyone out of being able to shop there in the first place.*

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## VISION AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following vision and guiding principles for The Center were crafted in response to input received from the working group, online survey, and public forum.

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## DRAFT VISION FOR WEST HARTFORD CENTER

Ensure West Hartford Center remains a great place for visitors, residents and business investment that fosters a strong sense of community. The Center is at the geographic heart of the Town and must remain a place that accommodates shopping, dining, leisure, work, housing and governmental services, in an architecturally, economically and socially diverse and pedestrian-friendly environment. To continue as an economic driver and attractive part of the community, the Center must continue to be well-maintained, comfortable, and safe for people of all ages, incomes, and backgrounds at all times of the day. The attractive look and feel of the Center and its integration into the surrounding neighborhoods is a unique strength and benefit to the Town.

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## DRAFT GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN SUPPORT OF THE VISION

- Maintain and enhance the character of the Center and its pedestrian-friendly nature, historic elements and diverse range of architectural styles while preserving the existing open feeling presence of natural light
- Encourage appropriate development and redevelopment of the Center to be consistent with its character and current commercial boundaries. Specific consideration should be paid to transitional "buffer" areas where commercial uses are adjacent residential, to ensure a contextually sensitive design and appropriate scale, height and setback that enhances and compliments the quality of the neighborhoods
- Manage traffic and parking to reduce impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods and enhance safety, mobility and convenience for businesses, residents and visitors
- Continue to embrace Complete Streets improvements within the Center and surrounding neighborhoods.
- Encourage growth and retention of a diversity of businesses in the Center to continue to attract visitors from neighboring communities as well as from West Hartford
- Continue to ensure that the Center is safe and comfortable place that attracts and serves all age groups
- Encourage the development of additional functional open space in the Center
- Continue to embrace and utilize neighborhood outreach and engagement as part of all future town efforts to implement these guiding principles

## NEXT STEPS

